

*Young Women's Attitudes towards Marriage and Childbearing by Race: The Problem of
Abstract Survey Questions*

General trends in family formation behavior have changed for all groups. Individuals are getting married later, the divorce rate is high and out-of-wedlock births are over 40% (Goldstein and Kenney 2001; Goldstein 1999 ; Martin et al. 2013). These changes are particularly pronounced among African Americans. In 2001, only 39 percent of African American children younger than 18 years of age were living with their married parents while 78 percent of White children lived with their married parents (Kennedy and Bumpass 2008). With regard to non-marital childbearing, seventy-two percent of African American children are born to a never married parent compared to only 29 percent for Whites (Martin et al. 2013). The reasons for such large racial differences continue to elude social scientists. Research has shown that structural factors such as economic stability, educational attainment, incarceration rates and employment status help explain differences in marriage by race (Goldstein and Kenney 2001; Western and McLanahan 2001; Wilson 1987). While these factors are important they cannot fully explain racial differences in family formation behavior. A topic studied less often is attitudes. Attitudes have been found to be a strong predictor of behavior from birth control use to church attendance (Kraus 1995). Attitudes can serve as a potentially rich area of study with regard to marriage formation. The present study contributes to this line of research.

The present study extends prior research through an investigation of attitudes towards marriage and family formation among Black and White young women. While research has shown that Blacks value marriage as much or more than Whites (Edin 2005; Carter 1993; Harknett and McLanahan 2004), my goal is to extend this research by examining the influence of how questions are asked on how individuals respond. I contend that the inability of attitudes to

help explain racial differences in marriage is a direct result of the way in which questions are asked, specifically direct vs. indirect questions. Then I will examine how individuals view family formation behaviors and compare them by race. In other words, do Black women value childbearing as more important when compared to marriage more often than White women? Illuminating the values individuals have helps researchers gain some insight into the decisions people make. Currently, there seems to be a disconnect between attitudes and behavior in the Black community; the present work will further shed light on whether or not this is in fact the case. The present study has three main questions: 1) Does the way in which survey questions ask about family formation behavior influence respondent's answers? 2) Do Black and White young women differ in their desired timing of marriage and childbearing? 3) And do Black women desire childbearing relative to marriage more often than White women?

Data and Sample

Data for this study comes from the Relationship Dynamic and Social Life survey (RDSL). RDSL is a survey of young women aged 18 to 19 years of age residing in a Michigan County. The survey was developed in an effort to disentangle the individual characteristics that may be responsible for explaining unintended pregnancies among young women. Detailed measures of relationships, contraceptive use, activities that compete with childbearing and community context were developed and included in the survey. The survey also contains in-depth measures of beliefs, expectations, and willingness to engage in those and related behaviors.

Since examining respondents before family formation behavior occurred was of particular interest to this study I did not include young women who were either married or had children. The full sample of unmarried, not pregnant young women included 921 cases. I used only cases that were nonmissing on race. I also limited my sample to Black and White women

since the number of cases for the other groups represented were too small to analyze. Due to these limitations, 2 cases were dropped. Missing values on covariates within the analytic sample were minimal for all variables, ranging from 0% to 4% missing. Therefore they were dropped. My final analytic sample included 815 cases.

Preliminary results

There has been growing consensus that attitudes cannot help explain racial differences in marriage formation behavior. This paper finds that the way in which survey questions are presented to respondents alters their responses suggesting that we have been unable to find race differences in attitudes with regard to marriage due to the way in which questions are asked across the board. In other words, when asked a general question about family formation race differences were inconsistent with actual behavior therefore making them less useful for understanding behavior.

A few examples from other studies include the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) that asks “It's better for a person to get married than to go through life being single,” and finds that Blacks are less tolerant of being single than Whites (Carter 1993), clearly replicating my results of indirect questions. Another more recent example is The Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study which asks if married parents are better for children and found that again Blacks agreed with this statement more often than Whites (Harknett and McLanahan 2004). Here I compared two questions that address the same family formation behavior but are worded differently. The first question was “Is it OK for a woman to have a child without being married?” Answers ranged from 1 to 5, (1) being strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. When asked this question Blacks were 39 percent less likely to agree that nonmarital childbearing was ok when compared to Whites ($p < .01$). The second question asks respondents “What is the chance

that you will have a baby while not being married?" Answers ranged from 1 to 5 (1) no chance to (5) 100% chance. Results using the exact same sample yielded starkly different results. Blacks were 3 times more likely to believe that it was very likely that they would have a child outside of marriage ($p < .001$). This was the only example in the sample that were directly related where I could demonstrate the problem of concern.

I go on to assess racial differences in attitudes towards family formation using more personally relevant questions. Table 2 shows descriptive statistics for my dependent variables. I found that on average the preferred age for childbearing was younger than the preferred age for marriage among African American women while White young women preferred to marry before childbearing. When asked about the most important aspect of family formation for their own lives, Black women consistently viewed marriage as less important than childbearing. White women viewed marriage as the most important aspect of family formation. Therefore, instead of having little to no connection to actual behavior, I find that attitudes closely relate to behavior and encourage future surveys to provide more personally relevant questions about family formation behavior.

Table 2. Preferred Ages and Importance of Family Formation of Young Women by Race

		<i>Blacks</i>			<i>Whites</i>		
		<i>M</i> or %	<i>SD</i>		<i>M</i> or %	<i>SD</i>	
Respondent's Characteristics							
<i>Demographic characteristics</i>							
Ideal Age of Marriage							
18-19 years old		.7			1.5		
20-24 years old		14.5			38.0		
25-29 years old		56.4			53.3		
30 years of age or older		28.4			7.2		
Ideal Age of Childbearing							
15-19 years old		6.0			2.5		
20-24 years old		21.3			18.8		
25-29 years old		50.4			60.3		
30 years of age or older		22.3			18.4		
Prefer Childbearing before Marriage (1-3)		2.18	.62		1.70	.56	
Bother If Never Marry (0-5)		3.20	1.71		3.67	1.53	
Bother If Never Have a Child (0-5)		3.74	1.68		3.71	1.62	
Childbearing more Important than Marriage (1-3)		2.23	.77		2.04	.73	
Number of cases (<i>n</i>)		282			531		
M = mean; SD = Standard Deviation							

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